The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE PECULIAR POWER OF HOPE

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In the season of Advent, Christians focus on the not-yet, the face of expectation. The angel announced to Mary, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son." Mary was troubled, no doubt frightened, but she agreed: "Here I am Lord." And she waited. We do not know what those months of waiting were like, but in our common life, yearly we recognize the fact that there are many seasons when God's presence is not-yet. All we can do is prepare and hope. In a world where tragedies, catastrophes, and violence greet us with each morning's headlines, to sing "Let every heart prepare him room" is to stand in radical hope. We have to practice and refine our human capacity for such expectant and wakeful hope.

Diane Eck
Encountering God

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Scripture
Isaiah 11:1-9
Romans 15:4-13

"... and a little child shall lead them."
Isaiah 11:6b (NRSV)

Last Wednesday there was a funeral for 21-year-old Ethan Kane at St. Clement's Catholic Church. The newspaper said that there wasn't much talk about the senseless violence that had claimed his life. Instead, priests and friends celebrated Ethan's courage and curiosity, caring and daring, his fierce passion for life.

The church has never been as full, the pastor said, even on Easter.

At the end the congregation clasped one another's hands and sang *"Let There Be Peace on Earth"* and as worshippers left they walked between two lines of young men, along the church steps, who had played with or been coached by Kane, or his father, Jim, at St. Clement's.

It was an extraordinary event. In spite of the reason for its happening in the first place, it was a particularly hopeful event. When I read about it, I knew I had a title for what I wanted to say this morning.

The Peculiar Power of Hope ...

Hope somehow having a stronger presence than despair. Hope somehow emerging in the midst of sadness. Hope having the last word. Peculiar!

The texts for this day are all about it. In the Psalter, we read about a good king who will dispense justice and righteousness, who will bring prosperity and who will defend, particularly, the poor.

St. Paul writing to the early Christian Church at Rome, coming to the end of a long and strenuous letter he has written explaining the Christian faith, writes:

> "... by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace ... so that you may abound in hope...."
> [Romans 15:4b, 13]

That's a lot of hope, frankly, in a situation that was not very hopeful. Paul himself was under arrest, on his way to his trial and eventual execution. The people to whom he was writing were a tiny, tiny minority within the Roman Empire which was, at that very moment, beginning to conclude that they were traitors, a threat to the order of the empire, and beginning to persecute them.

And, of course, that wonderful image of a Peaceful Kingdom, in the book of the prophet Isaiah, the hope for a time when a tiny shoot from the stump of Jesse — the cut off monarchy of David — will usher in righteousness, equity, justice and peace; when the oldest of enemies would lie down in harmony and peacefulness. And at the center of it all, a little child — a nursing child, a weaned child.

The Peculiar Power of Hope.

Children seem to be innately hopeful. Children symbolize hope, particularly at this time of year with their shining eyes and their expectation, almost unbearable, that something wonderful is going to happen in the next few weeks. They are, after all, all we have to show for ourselves and therefore the legacy of hope we have for the future. They not only symbolize hope, they are endlessly, enormously capable of hope.

You cannot look at the Christmas cards our tutoring youngsters create — see the pictures of Santa and trees and angels and read the verses — without wondering about the children's incredible spirit of hopefulness.

In Jonathan Kozol's wonderful new book, *Amazing Grace*, children are the custodians of hope. (By the way I know this is the third time it has found its way into a sermon recently, and I'll try not to let it happen again. Although, after one or two more references you won't have to buy it and read it for yourselves.) The book is about the children who live in the South Bronx, the poorest neighborhood in the nation. The title of the book refers to the *Amazing Grace* which is evident in the lives of the children, the hopefulness which nothing extinguishes. No matter how awful life is, the children retain the capacity to hope. It is amazing.

Kozol's book is not easy to read. He's discouraged and angry. The children's hopes will be betrayed by such a complex, complicated, demonic web of circumstance, neglect, greed and evil that adults soon learn the foolishness of hope. That's another story — the most recent chapter of which is being written as the President and Congress talk about balancing the budget, and one hopes and prays that someone in the room is thinking about the children.

Kozol writes about Anthony, a 12-year-old who lives with his mother, sleeps on the couch, whose uncle is a drug addict living on the street mostly. Kozol observes how spiritual the children are and one day asks Anthony what he thinks about heaven, about the Kingdom of God.

Anthony wrote it out for him:

> "God will be there. He'll be happy that we have arrived ... People will come hand-in-hand. It will be bright, not dim ... all friendly animals will be there, but no mean ones... As for television — forget it! If you want vision you can use your eyes to see the people that you love. No one will look at you from the outside. People will see you from the inside. All the people from the street will be there. My uncle will be there and he will be healed. You won't see him buying drugs, because there won't be any money.
>
> "No violence will there be in heaven. There will be no guns or drugs or IRS... You'll recognize all the children who have died when they were little. Jesus will be good to them and play with them." [p. 237, 238]

Annabelle, age 11, in spite of the grimness of her environment, is the most joyful child Kozol has ever met. Her picture of heaven is more colorful than Anthony's, but no less hopeful:

> "People who are good go up to heaven. People who are bad go down to where the devil lives. They have to wear red suits, which look like red pajamas. People who go to heaven wear a nightgown, white, because they are angels. All little children who die when they are young will go to heaven. Dogs and kittens go to animal heaven ... you can visit each other on the weekend. In heaven you don't pay for things with money. You pay for things you need with smiles." [p. 129]

There are 2,500 years between Anthony's and Annabelle's visions and the vision of the Prophet Isaiah. But they are similar. They are about justice and righteousness and peace, and about children. They are about the peculiar power of hope.

Physicians know about the power of hope. The issue of whether or not to tell a patient that there is absolutely no reasonable possibility for recovery is an important one. On the one side is the need to be honest and the right of the patient to know the truth. On the other side, however, is the quality and sometimes duration of life that hope seems to enable.

People in prison for extended periods of time — prisoners of war, hostages, for instance — know that when there is no hope for release, no possibility of liberation, life becomes less human, people begin to act differently and meanness, selfishness, pettiness replace the traditional rituals that make us a civilization.

The real danger in the ghettoization of poverty, in public housing projects for instance, is the creation of a culture of hopelessness. It is not only the reason for urban violence but when there is no hope, life loses its meaning and its value, other life and my own life. Michael Dyson, a Professor at the University of North Carolina, addressed a

gathering at the First Methodist Church last Sunday afternoon about the current climate of impatience with the poor in our nation:

> "It is hard to be good and responsible and respectful," Dyson said, "when you don't have any money, and don't have a job and don't really have a way to get one, and if you found one you don't have a way to get there and back home," and there's no place to put your kids, and you live on the top floor at Cabrini and even a trip to ground level to take a walk is a life-threatening experience and the government is talking about making you more responsible for yourself by reducing funding to the welfare system, it's hard to be good when you have no hope.

Beyond the social and political dimension this topic becomes personal for everyone of us.

James Forbes, preaching minister at the Riverside Church in Manhattan says that "a religion which does not offer a basis of hope does not make the grade."

There are times, Jim Forbes quips, when you ask:

> "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? And the reply is that the heart, soul, mind and body have staged a sick-out: the negative forces of life have gotten the upper hand and there seems to be no evidence to suggest that things will change soon enough to make a difference."

"Hard core discouragement does not respond to cheery pep talks." [*The Courage to Hope, NICM Journal*, Winter 1979] Who hasn't experienced it? There are days for each of us when life feels like a battle and we're not sure who's winning: when no matter how hard we work — nothing gets better. As a matter of fact, when there is no hope, when the experience of Christmas has not gotten to you and at that deeper level in your soul, all the festivity seems a little flat and stale, artificial even, maybe even painful.

Ann Weems, who lost a son, has poured out her heart in a book of poems, *Psalms of Lament:*

> "What do they celebrate in the sanctuary, O God?
>
> And of what do they sing in joyful procession?
>
> In their exuberance their voices fill the sky with song,
> and my ears are filled with their praise of you,
> their songs of thanksgiving for your advent.
>
> How can I join them singing, O God, if you do not come to me?
>
> How can I shout 'Gloria' if you will not advent here?"

Every year it seems something happens to underscore the fact that cheery festivity alone is not adequate, that there is a place deep in our souls where we long to see light in darkness, to hear about freedom precisely in the midst of captivity. To hear a word of authentic hope in the midst of discouragement.

This year, for this community, it is the death of Ethan Kane, last Saturday night; a Loyola junior, bright, committed, a scholar — athlete, one of our best, shot and killed after a night on the town, arguing with men trying to steal his van. Doesn't that negate the fantasy of the holiday? Isn't that the reality with which we must learn to live? Doesn't that suggest the senseless, randomness of life, the ultimate meaningless of it all?

Unless, unless — ultimate issues have already been resolved for Ethan, and his family, and for Anthony and Annabelle; unless there is a light shining in the darkness which the darkness cannot overcome; unless the dry stump of Jesse sends up a shoot, small, quiet, unnoticeable, unless the harsh realities of life are confounded by a child.

Hope requires a commitment. In a strange sort of way — hope is a gift that comes to those who have decided to be hopeful. Hopeful people are not passive recipients, but committed, involved participants. Hopeful people are impatient, always stirring things up, unwilling to accept the status quo, always working for a better tomorrow!

Someone said that "nothing really great ever gets done without a great many lives lived in expectation." Israel is not coming home from exile until the people hear the word of hope and get ready for a journey across the desert. Nothing is going to change in the city unless a great many of us hope with impatience for change. Nothing is going to change until a great many of us hope and work to bring our city home from its ugly captivity to drugs, and crime, and poverty and racism until a lot of people like Ethan Kane coach and teach and help and feed and support and think and vote.

Arthur J. Gossip, who taught and preached a generation ago, coined the phrase:

> "'People who live on tiptoe,' the people who always sense that something big may happen at any time. Hush! Is not this it coming now? With people like that God can do anything." [See Halford Luccock, *A Sprig of Holly*, p. 46]

There is a place deep within us that longs for a strong and profound word of hope, a word that assures us that no matter what happens in the world, in our personal lives, we are in the hands of one who loves us and will never let us go.

That is why we are here, I think: to open ourselves to the power of that hope.

> "O my God, there is an inn in my heart where the door is open to you."

Ann Weems wrote:

> "Please, Holy One, be born anew to me
>
> Glory to you, O God,
>
> who advents even into the life
> of one who weeps the day away.
>
> Glory to you in the highest
> for you are not ashamed
> to walk with me in darkness.
>
> You have heard my cry
> and turned to me
> and I have seen a great light."

Or as a prisoner wrote 2,000 years ago.

> "May the God of all hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

May you hear the word of hope

May you see signs of hope in the world.

And — in your heart of hearts — in your soul, may you experience the peculiar power of hope.

For "*Lo, How a Rose e'er Blooming From Tender Stem Hath Sprung.*"

Amen.